

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**THE WORKING PEOPLE OF LOWELL
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
MARY BLEWETT/MARTHA MAYO**

SOUTHEAST ASIAN PROJECT

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P = PAUL

H = HAI

Tape 86.25

P: Paul

H: Hai

P: We are at the University of Lowell, and we will be talking about some typical problems that face refugees in resettling in the United States. May I ask You a question about the historical background of the refugees -- how they have come in different waves; that the Vietnamese and Cambodians don't have similar experiences.

H: The refugees from Southeast Asia came to the US in different phases and times. I think that you might want to look back at the historical development in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in order to understand how these refugees came about and how they're being resettled in the US.

After the Geneva Conference of 1954, a lot of Vietnamese went south, to South Vietnam, to establish a republic there. With the aid of the United States, they fought the North Vietnamese from 1956 to 1975. In 1975, the United States left, the South Vietnamese collapsed, and the North Vietnamese forces came -- and so you have the first phase of refugees that came out of South Vietnam. Out of this first wave refugees, you find 30,000 resettled in the US. Most of these came from the urban centers, with greater education, and experience of working with Westerners. So the initial phase of resettlement was

somewhat easy for the government agencies and the private, Voluntary agencies to resettle them. After 1976, when the Communist authorities instituted more oppressive policies of re-education, nationalization of private properties, classifying people according to economic status labeling people who are not from the laboring classes lost a number of privileges to educate their kids, jobs. You have the beginning of a second wave of refugees fleeing by whatever means were available to them. Fleeing what became a more oppressive and repressive regime. Most of these fled South Vietnam by boat, and so you have the beginning of the boat people. The third wave of refugees came about in 1978 and 1979 when the Communist authorities expelled the ethnic Chinese from North and South Vietnam. So you have a third wave of refugees that fled North Vietnam. Many of them, in fact, a quarter of a million of them, resettled in China. Others fled to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and resettled in many Third World countries besides the United States. So that's the story of the refugees from Vietnam.

In Laos, the story is slightly different. The pro-Communist faction -- the Pathet Lao -- defeated the Royal government of

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Laos in December of 1975. Those who have any direct association with the Royal Government and the United States fled. In particular interest is a group of highland Lao, the Hmong, who for over 15 years worked closely with the US CIA to help rescue American fighters who crashed in the jungles, and also help to contain the North Vietnamese troops going down the Ho Chi Minh trail to South Vietnam. So these Hmong became a primary target for the reprisals on the part of the North Vietnamese. They also became a part of the first wave of refugees from Laos. The lowland Lao also had to go through in 1978, re-education and nationalization of their property, reclassification of their background. All of these repressive measures led to a wave of refugees who sought to escape Laos by crossing the Mekong river. They resettled in Thailand because of a commonality of interests, language that the Thai have with the Laotians. Many of them liked to stay there, some went back to Laos if there was no fear of reprisals against them. But that cannot be assured, so it isn't always successful.

In Cambodia, the story of the refugees is more dramatic, but at a later phase. After 1979, you see a flood of Cambodian refugees spilling over into Thailand. That is because from April 1975 to December 1978, the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge regime imposed such tight and horrible measures on the Cambodian people that they were really hardly surviving that regime. A genocide happened in that four year period, some estimate that 3 million people were killed. Mostly those who had any connection, directly or indirectly, with any Western people. They were the targets of reprisals. That is when the North Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia against the Pol Pot I-hmer Rouge -- mostly because they claimed that they +ought them on the border trying to retake land. This led to the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. This released the floodgates of Cambodian refugees into Thailand. These are the historical changes that happened.

P: Recently I read about another group from Laos -- the Nung -- the highlanders have greater problems than others with A-djusting':,

H: The Nung live on the highlands between Laos and Vietnam. These people are very skillful in fighting, like warriors. They were used by the French before to serve in the French army. They are known to be very aggressive and not hesitate to kill. Therefore, nobody really liked them. They have developed a great deal of animosity between the lowland Vietnamese, and the highland Nung. Unless, these Vietnamese are confident of the loyalty of the Nungs, which they don't, the Nungs will always be persecuted. That's one of the reasons why the Nungs don't feel that they are being treated fairly in Vietnam or Laos under the new Communist regimes.

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So they flee. This is not unusual, because they feel that as a minority they are experiencing discrimination. The combination of that and historical animosity leads to persecutions.

P: Would you say that the Vietnamese and Chinese are cultural similar, and different from the Cambodians, Laotians, and Thais Cultural identity?

H: Yes. You have to distinguish these sophisticated kind of distinctions. There are political distinctions and cultural distinctions. In terms of cultural similarities and distinctions, the Vietnamese tend to share a great deal more common heritage with the Chinese than the Cambodians. Although, there is a great amount of Cultural exchanges that are very subtle. So you can't say that this is all Chinese or all Cambodian. A lot of people say that the Vietnamese music is very different from the Chinese that's because it has acquired a lot of influences from Cambodian music. A lot of terminologies in Vietnam derive from the Cambodian, as well as the Chinese. You might say there is, in Vietnam, a crossroad of two major civilizations: Hindu or Indian, and the Chinese civilization. The Chinese civilization occupies the upper level of social life -- the highbrow -- the local level is Hindu and Cambodian civilization that influences life.

P: That reminds me of a fact about the ethnic Chinese that had been expelled from Vietnam tend to -- in Malaysia or Singapore -- tend to dominate the upper stratas of their societies.

H. Yes, particularly in Singapore. Malaysia has sort of made a decision to split from Singapore which is mostly Chinese. Also Malaysia remained Muslim. It is true in the Philippines too. The Chinese tend to be in the wealth, business. But in politics, they don't get involved too deeply in political relationships. Most of the Chinese are not a part of a political group, so the result is that they are discriminated against. The ethnic Vietnamese, or Philippines feel that they are being taken advantage of by the Chinese. So they adopt exclusionary policies against the Chinese.

P: I interrupted you though. The reasons I am interested in knowing about the distinctions between the different groups is because when they come to the United States it does make a difference in how we adjust to them and they to us.

H: I understand. I think the distinctions or the differences between these ethnic groups depends mostly on their education background, their exposure to the industrialized, urbanized environment, or the more rural environment that they come

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from. In the social relationships, those that are familiar with the impersonal, as opposed to those that are familiar with the personal and close-knit relationships. In terms of education, the Vietnamese tend to have a higher level of formal education. That's doesn't mean that they are more intelligent, it just happened that they are exposed to more formal education. As compared to the Cambodians and Laotians, the Vietnamese have more exposure to the industrialized environment before they come to the United States. But even now there is a large number of Vietnamese who are fishermen from rural areas, and face the same kinds of problems as Cambodians and Laotians. So it is a matter of exposure and education, if you run into a group with less exposure to urban living or education -- you will find the same problem. The Vietnamese have something less of a problem because they have informal, impersonal relations; so it is less distressing for them to move and make new friends. It would be much more difficult for the Cambodians and the Laotians if you are not exposed to these informal relationships. If you are dependent on close-knit and personalized relationships, you feel very insecure in Western centers.

P: What does a close-knit relationship mean⁷? When I think of close-knit relationship -- what I'd characterize as a warm family atmosphere and associated behaviors-- might offend a lot of Cambodians. Let's say I emphasize a lot of hugging, kissing ... as my idea of a close relationship ...

H: No, no, that would be part of it; but, it has to do with one's drives for social recognition and social adaptation to the mainstream. If you are in a close knit social relationship, you have all of that sense of security: warmth, friendship, affections, and whatnot. But particularly if you are an ethnic minority, this tends to keep them excluded from the mainstream value system. It is harder to venture out, mingle, to acquire mainstream value systems and social, political activities. It is more painful, more risky, less confident not having this kind of exposure. It is harder for them therefore to assimilate and integrate. It has a lot to do with one's social and cultural background. If you happen to come from a Vietnamese or Cambodian urban center, it is easier to decide to move to a new town, a new school--because you are just one step away from being an American. Your social network or support is not that important if you from that setting. But if you are not from that kind of a background -- like in Cambodia or Laos -- where YOU live in a close-knit village setting, when you venture Out, if your English is not good enough; you run the risk of being totally isolated -- alien within the larger

mainstream society. Therefore, you will be at a loss to gain access to a lot of available resources, and you will be dependent on the resources of your sponsor.

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P: So, I guess we can talk about sponsors now. How much do sponsors sponsor people? Or does it differ with different individuals and groups? In other words, I've heard of people being sponsored just for the sake of being sponsored and continuing to live in the United States; but the sponsors don't offer any help. In some cases, they even use the refugees as a form of slave labor.

H: Yes, I think it is hard to generalize sponsorship, but if you go back to the history of sponsorships, the federal government in 1975 adopted the policy that you need a sponsor to get out of refugee camps. Without American sponsors, or relatives, you are going to stay in the refugee camps like Camp Pendleton ... I forget the other two camps they had. A lot of these voluntary agencies, run around looking for sponsors to help these Vietnamese refugees in these camps. The sponsors responsibilities is like being a god parent. You are around to provide advice, if the refugee asks you for advice. If you are good enough to donate some of your own clothes and furniture, that's fine. It ranges from the minimum, to the complete takeover of the refugee's needs. Some churches set up a committee to provide everything from A to Z for a Vietnamese family that I know. Some churches want to do all of this work because they expect the refugee family to join the church. So there is that other side of sponsorship -- it is not all strictly humanitarian; it could be parochial or some other religious purposes. There is some desire to use refugees for material gain as well. If you go back to the history of sponsorship, back in 1978, there are stories of dozens of Vietnamese families kept in Georgia and Florida farms to work as labor for American farmers. Today, there are still cases of sponsors who take advantage of refugee cheap labor. But, I think that the major cases were done out of good will and for humanitarian reasons, to provide guidance and some assistance to the refugees. There is no legal obligations, only moral responsibilities. Many sponsors have become close friends to refugee families, giving them advice, Support; that's what refugee's ask for, and that's all that needs to be done. I think that the more important relationships is that of the voluntary agencies that sponsor them.

P: Who are these?

H: These VOLAG's include the US Catholic Conference, World Relief Service, International Rescue Committee, the Lutheran Education and Refugee Service ...

P: Have you ever heard of an American Fund for Czechoslovakian refugees?

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H: Yes, the American Fund . They are the dominant agency that brought the majority of Cambodians into Lowell. They started, I know the group because I worked with the

first director in the Lowell area in 1979 -- after the end of the Pol Pot, and Cambodians fled across to Thailand. There was a tremendous international appeal to resettle Cambodians because of their dramatic experience. So, a lot of Cambodians were sponsored to come to the US. The American Fund of Czech. Refugees was the main one, the only one, that resettled them in Lowell. Before that, Lowell had no agency to resettle refugees. There were just a few Vietnamese families who came to Lowell because of friendships or connections with Americans who worked in Vietnam before. There are no refugees until 1979, in 1979 some 600 refugees were resettled from Cambodia in a very short amount of time. There was a dire need for social services -- which were not available. I was instrumental in getting a grant for social services: interpreter services, ESL training, orientation services to these refugees through the Indochinese Refugee Foundation.

P: What was the International Institute doing at this time? I know that now they focus on resettlement. Back then they weren't?

H: Back then between 1979 and 1981, the International Institute of Lowell was in a transitional period in the sense that the director was about to retire -- Mrs. Mello. She reached her retirement age, and we had long discussions with her. She felt that the agency was not ready; doesn't have the capacity to start this

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P: So you were just saying about the International Institute not being ready to be involved in refugee issues in '79.

H: Yes, that is correct. I serve on the Institute's board from 1978 to this time, and I know that only after 1984 did the Institute become more directly involved in refugee resettlement. In 1983, the Institute received a small grant to provide case management for refugees. So, they have the money to staff one case manager to help refugees. And also in 1983-84, the federal regulations allow refugees to sponsor their families through the ODP (Orderly Departure Program) . So, you have the beginnings of a number of Vietnamese coming to the Institute asking the Institutes to provide the legal papers for their relatives in Saigon to be sponsored to be resettled in Lowell. Thus, the beginning of the Institute involvement in the resettlement program. And this point, the

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Institute is providing several kinds of services to refugees. Including- language classes, case management, interpreter's services, housing interpreters, and immigration papers.

P: So does the state fund the International Institute?

H: The state only funds a partial program. The Institute receives its funding from other sources, including the United Fund, some private fundings. Certainly, the United

Fund provides case workers to service any group of immigrants who ask the Institute for services. But, it is very important to realize that it depends on the staff. If the staff has the type of language skills, or the cultural sensitivity to one particular ethnic group; that ethnic group will be better served by them. If you look at the operation of the Institute, you will find that the United Fund money, funds only certain groups. It is the Office of Refugee Resettlement that provides the funding for staff working with refugees in the community. That's the political side of resettlement.

In addition to the International Institute of Lowell, you also have the Cambodian MAA, which is a very big agency providing resettlement services to refugees. The CMAA received contracts from the state to provide ESL training, they also provide cultural orientation, job development, placement service, interpreter service, housing counseling to refugees -- mostly Cambodians, but some service to Laotians and Vietnamese who come to ask for services. In addition to the CMAA, you also have the LMAA and the VMAA.

P: Was there a time when the MAA's were under one unified control?

H: Not really. Before the establishment of the different ethnic MAA's, there were no separate services for them. So the service was provided to the Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotians under one organization -- the Indochinese Refugee Foundation. I served as the founder and the board director of the Indochinese Refugee Foundation from 1980 to 1985. We raised funds in order to provide services to Indochinese refugees. At that time, we had an American director; and we have Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese counselors so that each ethnic group has its own staff to work with.

P: Is the state or the federal government cutting back on funding to individual MAA's which might force them to recombine their efforts?

H: Definitely, the federal funding is cutting back on social services to refugees. These service providers, and the MAA's will have to reconsider their programs, and merge with others